

Title—At the Heart of the Empire: Indians and the Colonial Encounter in Late-Victorian Britain
Author—Antoinette Burton
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Categories: Metropolitan Attitudes, Colonialism, Subaltern, Movement/Migration, Empire
Place: British Empire (Indian & British Metropole)
Time: 1860-1910

Argument Synopsis:

Burton is focused on the colonial encounter in the metropole of colonial subjects from the Indian subcontinent in Britain in the late nineteenth century. There is significant literature on the movement of colonial subjects in the metropole during the interwar period, but Burton makes a case for this earlier period of interaction. Burton examines three different case studies of the colonial encounter in order to explore how imperial ideologies played themselves out in personal, political, social, and cultural relations in late-Victorian Britain. The case studies are three different travel narratives from Indian travelers in the metropole—Pandita Ramabai at Cheltenham and Wantage; Cornelia Sorabji at Oxford; and Behramji Malabari in London. The accounts left by these three of their experiences in the British Isles in the 1880s through 1890s suggests that the United Kingdom could be as much of a contact zone as the colonies themselves. Looking at Indians' negotiations of colonialism in the metropole demonstrates how Britain itself was an imperial terrain. Essentially Burton examines how ideologies of imperialism worked in the cultural practices of some English people at the epicenter of the empire and how the colonial subjects they encountered there engaged with those practices.

The three case studies Burton examines illustrate how the colonial encounter in the metropole could unsettle the boundaries of empire and remake power relations in imperial culture. Her first subject, Ramabi, was an educator who came to England in 1883 seeking a medical education and left in 1886 following a conversion to Christianity. Her experience reveals some of the constraints that imperial power relationships placed on the possibilities of women's solidarity, as well as the self-determination required by an Indian woman trying to negotiate a path for herself and her reform program at the intersection of imperial Christianity, women's philanthropy, and social reform. Burton's second subject, Sorabji, arrived in Britain in 1890 and studied law at Somerville College, Oxford. She passed the civil law exam in 1892 and was internationally famous as a lawyer in the 1930s for her defense of Katherin Mayo's *Mother India* in the Calcutta Court of Wards. The last case study, Malabari, differs from the first two in that he was not dependent on benefactors for his passage and living arrangements, as he was already well-established as a poet and journalist before his arrival. His account of his journey "The Indian Eye on English Life" is revealing about the kind of reception Indian men might expect on the streets of London. These accounts reinforce that empire was, and is, a fundamental and constitutive part of English culture and national identity at home. Travel to Britain enabled colonial subjects to lay claim to a kind of imperial citizenship; to insist they were mobile subjects at least partly of their own making rather than fixed as objects of colonial reform projects. Burton insists that colonial subjects must be counted among the makers of imperial culture in and beyond the parameters of late nineteenth century Britain.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Travel enabled Indians to evaluate the twin phenomenon of English-ness and British imperialism from a different perspective than was available in India
- Cultural identities are negotiable, contingent, and ever shifting largely because they are the product not of inheritance or origins alone but of politics at the micro and macro levels
- Indians making their way across the British metropolitan landscape helped to define Britain as Britain